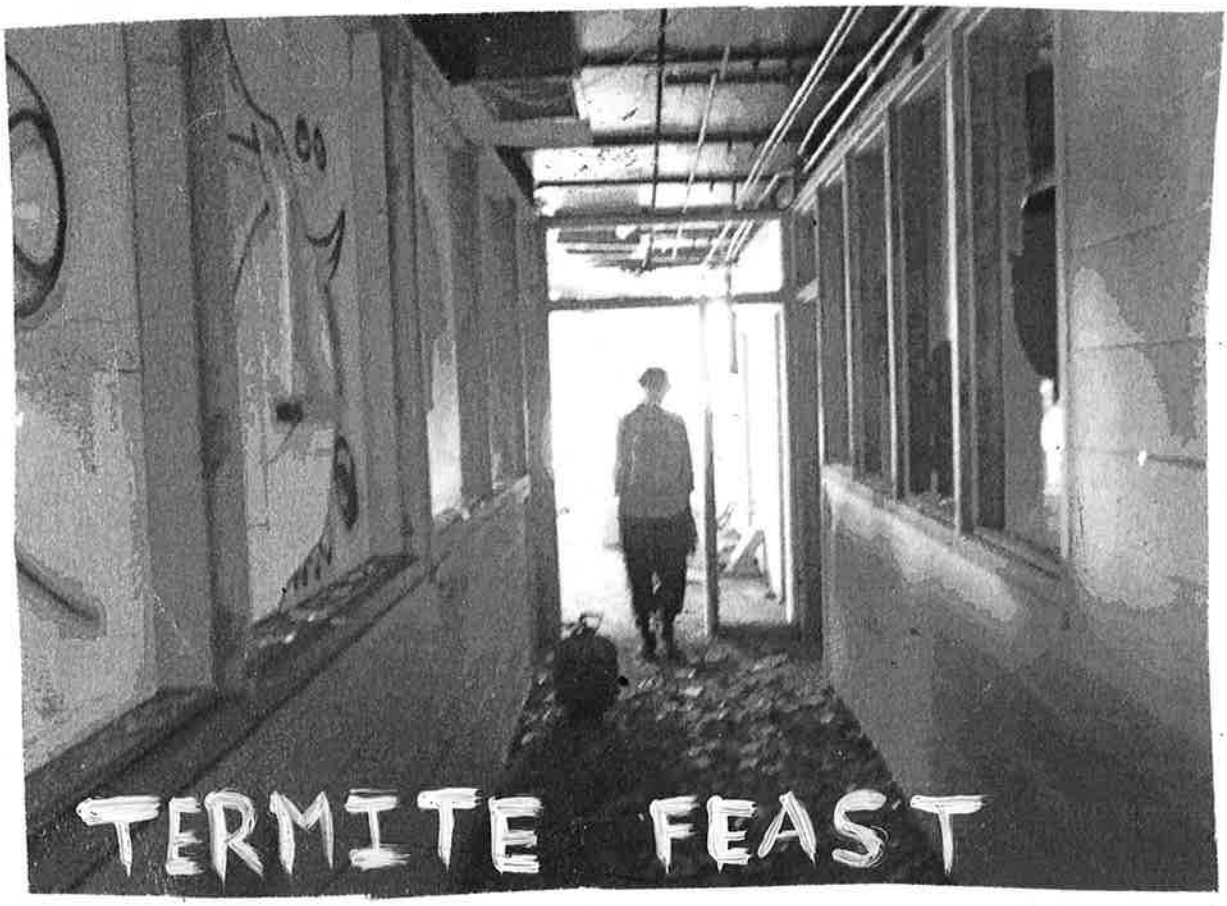
TERMITE FEAST

for mark essex

and
my friends on
st ferdinand

This is basically all the writing Ive done from september 2010 - april 2013. I guess a lot of it is sad but Im doing [redacted] better lately.

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Thanks for reading this.

Smyrna

I.

I am not interested in what came in the beginning. The spark of life out of the gaping nothing that was there before, that transformation makes mathematical sense – shit happens. What is crazy, and what doesn't make sense, is how we survive in the world that came out of the void.

What's important to me isn't creation myths, it's the myths of survival. In this kind of world, survival is the only miracle.

II.

My name is Angeliki. Vasili was my husband. We lived together in Smyrna, loving until my belly was swollen. Then the army set the whole city on fire. We were caught in the drafts of hot air above the flames, pushed up and out, our bodies bits of singed paper fleeing up a chimney. A Turkish fisherman seemed kind and offered to take us to the islands, but when we got out into the sea he forced us off into the water. Soldiers were waiting on shore with bayonets. They didn't think we were worth the bullets. We took our chances in the waves, swam in the direction of land we couldn't see.

I became an aquatic creature. The little seeds of seaweed worked their way into my skin. Tiny young shellfish attached themselves to my arms and legs. I was accepted by the water and joined it. Maybe it was because of what swam inside me. I could swim for days in ways that Vasili couldn't. He slipped below the foam and I almost went with him but something tugged me from my navel and led me to the surface. I heard watery voices praying for land. I went on.

I crawled onto the shore of Chios and someone brought me north to my relatives in Kardamyla. There I pushed and birthed Michali, my little water creature, watched him cry the liquid out of his lungs with his first breaths, watched him become terrestrial in an instant after nine months of swimming in the sea of myself. I watched him go where I could never.
The sea grew on me even after I came onto land. I refused to bathe because I thought this could keep the aquatic parts of me dry and weak and waiting for the tide to come in. But I couldn't stop crying when I thought of Vasili and that was the ocean they needed. The barnacles grew huge on me. I am lost under the kelp. Now the smell of me keeps even the goats away. I don't have the strength to lift what's grown on me. I don't leave the bed Michali was born in. I don't know what I am doing on land. The sea is a part of me and Vasili is now a part of the sea. I fled fire, became water, and now I will die stuck on the shore. Good luck, Michali.

III.

Like a lot of the stories my father tells me, this one may not be entirely factual. But that doesn't matter because it is true. It is a story I was raised on. It is a story that told me that comfort and peace are sweet but fleeting. It is a story that told me to have an escape plan. It is a story that told me what happened to my people in Smyrna in 1922. It is a story that told me mothers are magical, and that the sea can be our adversary but it can also save us. It is a story that tells me I wouldn't be here if not for the multitude of miracles that kept my ancestors alive. Angeliki and Vasili are related to me: I forget how distantly, because they feel close by. I try to remember them when I face the fires and waves.

Sandpaper

I want to see you take off that crown of stinging caterpillars. The days haven't grown hot enough for them to fall from the live oaks so I know you put them there on purpose. They may perform an important role but I don't think you need that itchy armor right now.

I am too wrapped up and speechless beneath the heft of this moon. You are burning your three blue candles in the field, insects humming at the edges, your freckled hands hold offerings, dropping myrrh and cacao and half a pastry in the triangular flame. I don't have to say a word.

Some day the caterpillars will change into dozens of soft brown moths. The powder from their wings will dust the cheeks of a hundred sweethearts.

It will be none of my business.

But as the blue wax leaves lines in the grass I say a small prayer for you and all the other moments that matter:

Please let me be near for a little while. I know I am a gnarled and twisted pulled up root but let me get close to the sandpaper mystery of you, one day with all of your help my rough edges will wash up smooth like driftwood on the levee.

toothless and you bet no one got any coins from any faeries in the process and you slip and slide your way home.

once home, you either drink most of a handle of whiskey and remove your teeth one by one with a string and a doorknob, or you turn back into a slug and slide down into the ocean until a desperate fish eats your dead slime. Which do you choose? What does that say about you? Sit with this feeling for a while.

a poem my brother wrote when he was 10

I ate a muffin I thought about
nothing and I stayed up to
midnight with a girl.
I was normal at 10 o'clock.
I went to a friends house and we
played with a weapon.

Before I was a stripper

it was my first time at a strip club, and my only time as a patron. it was in some terrible part of massachusetts, which is perhaps the most terrible state. the first thing I saw was the giant airbrush mural above the bar. It was of a dark sky with lightning striking, and in the center was a naked blonde woman with giant breasts and no pubic hair. She was flanked by two white tigers. At this point I thought that maybe strip clubs were awesome.

I quickly realized that some people go to strip clubs to watch sports on TV. Maybe football is better when you are resisting the magnetic tug that moving flesh has on most peoples eyeballs. I wouldn't know, because I think football is fucking boring, and flesh is always interesting even if it isn't sexy. But this strip club had five big TVs competing with the dancers. Four of them were showing sports, but one, way off to the left above where the private dances happened, was showing Animal Planet.

I wasn't totally aware of how strip clubs worked. I sat at the stage and threw down a dollar every once in a while, to pay for the dancing. Each woman had a specific act: one could make her butt move wildly without really moving the rest of her body. One woman would spread her lips while making unfortunate kissing noises with her mouth. Another woman just had really big boobs. I am sure I looked dirty and weird, and the dancers ignored me until there was about seven bucks in front of me. Then a woman with a big butt took the money and showed me what her act was:

she positioned herself so that my face was near her butt, and began to hit me with it. It was at this point that I looked at

Animal Planet, and watched a desert toad burying itself in the sand to prepare for the dry season. It would dig down and cover itself with a protective mucus membrane and sleep until the rains came again. The womans butt kept pushing my glasses into my face in a painful way, and I wished I was protected too.

My glasses couldn't have felt that good on her butt either, and as I watched the toad and smelled the baby powder smell of her, I kept trying to take my glasses off, but each time I would almost grab them her butt would come back to hit me and I would put my hand down because you are not allowing to touch the dancers, and I didn't want her thinking I was some creeper copping a feel. So I just sat there and took it.

finally she decided that she had succeeded in giving my face a seven dollar butt beating, and she moved on to other men. I put my coat on in a daze and left. Goodbye lightning tiger woman. Goodbye desert toad. the smell of baby powder lingered on my face the whole ride home.

Declaration of Extraterrestriality

I would like to formally declare independence from the earth I am stranded on.
My father used to joke that he found his kids on farms after spaceships had landed. He said we were inside glowing cabbages when he pulled back the leaves. I always laughed but now I am beginning to think he was actually telling the truth. It is not that I am too good to wade through the mud of this planet. I may not be good enough. When things get heavy here I can't help but think I was meant to swim through a gaseous

You are caught up in this thinking and don't realize that you are right near a fence that a crazed chow dog is about to try and bite you through. You can't jump back quick enough to dodge its jaws. But, amazingly, the chunk of your jacket that the dog bit just slides right out of its mouth. The chow has no teeth! You think it must be an old dog. You either mock it or feel sorry for it. Which do you choose? What does that say about you? Sit with this feeling for a while.

You walk on to the 7-11 to get a big slurpee. The whole way to the store has been heavily salted, and you almost wipe out a few times like a cartoon villain running on top of a bunch of marbles. A weird greek looking dude is at the register and says hi or something, you can't really tell cause his accent is too thick. you mix the red and the blue slurpee flavors because that is the shit. you try to make small talk with the greek but you realize he's not greek, he just has no teeth! he says something else in what could be another language but is probably just a strange dialect of toothless english, and you don't understand what he meant until he points to the cash register which reads: "1.85".

you pay with your stupid credit card. you smile nervously and he gets freaked out and says something to a customer that is just coming in. you can't wait to commiserate with someone else about toothless possibly-greek guy but shit! this new guy is toothless too. you try to say something but he looks at you like one of those bats with horrible giant noses that live in the nocturnal animal exhibit of the zoo. He echolocates at you in some mostly indecipherable semblance of gummy english and you run out onto the salty sidewalks and you look down and realize it isn't salt its teeth! the fucking street is littered with teeth and from now on everyone you meet will probably be

pulling sinister carriages.

If I were you

I'd grab a whip and make like a monk

till the blood ran down my back.

expect the ground to open up

beneath you and the rest of the west.

I am one of a million termites

that are waiting to feast on your wooden heart.

you are weak and we are starving. the end is at hand.

Guided Meditation

please have someone read this to you while you close your eyes and concentrate:

you wake up from a winter nap. its already dark and that's confusing. you feel like you were cheated out of some precious hours of sunlight. you decide that you might as well leave the house today because if you don't you'll feel like a slug that deserves a good salting or a slug that drowns in a dish of beer left in the garden. either way you don't feel like being a gastropod so you bundle up and brave the elements. you walk down the street and feel the crunch of big salt crystals underfoot. You think that the city must have heard a storm was on the way. You either appreciate the preemptive strike against mother natures disruption of your everyday comfortable patterns, or you hate it. Which do you choose? What does that say about you? Sit with this feeling for a while.

giant instead. My soft feelings weren't meant for such a hard world.
Sometimes I am at war with my alien brain. My programming was incomplete, interrupted mid-download. What am I supposed to say to you?

In moments when I might want to die I think maybe I just need to be squeezed in ways only a black hole can squeeze: crush me to my essence, take the five feet ten inches of me and press me into a single truthful atom because at this size I am just lying to you with each awkward movement I make.

I am waiting for the weight to be lifted. I am waiting to float effortlessly. I have been waiting twenty five years for the mothership to take me back home. But until it comes, I'd like you to take care with me, I'm not used to it here, you do things so strangely, please tell me what you're doing and what it might mean.

Interview for a date

Hi, yeah, sorry I'm late, I don't know my way around town too well, yes, uh, here's my application.
Cover letter? No, I think I forgot that, or the truth is I just didn't know I needed one, sorry, I'm not too used to this.
Do I have any experience? sure, yes, I mean, enough that I think I kind of know what I'm doing, but not so much that I seem cheap or a health risk or anything. I mean, yes, I've been with some women and a fella or two, it's just none of them ever asked for a cover letter before.
what am I bringing to the table? well, I've got a two person tent, a pickup truck in pretty decent condition except the drivers side door doesn't open, I sort of live in the tent when

it's too hot outside to sleep in the truck, I lived in this abandoned nightclub for a while but someone broke my door down when I was away at a party and then I got scared and moved out. They didn't steal anything, just smashed the door, I guess I had nothing worth stealing. It's ok though, the mold in that place was starting to get to me, and I'm not sure how long the ceiling was going to last, a tent is more dependable and when it's moldy you can just spray it with bleach, and I - what? do I have any skills? um, I think I'm pretty good at thinking up puns. I can remember the words to a lot of pop songs, and I can usually make rice without burning it. Some people say I am a good dancer but what they really mean is that I am not afraid of letting people see how weird I look when I move my body, which is maybe not a skill so much as it's a lack of shame. The bedroom? well, like I said before, I don't really have one, but I guess you actually mean sex, well, I don't think I have much raw talent, but I'm certainly enthusiastic, and, you know, open to constructive criticism, does that answer that question? Oh, well, yeah, I understand, it is a recession after all, I'm sure there are plenty of applications, if none of them work out though, you have my number, right?

Richards Wild Irish Rose

Richard wasn't a gambler

his lungs never inhaled smoke

he was a sharp-dressed well-groomed man

real careful when he spoke

but then he met a lady

she changed all his rights to wrongs

of sweet fleeting puddles
and desperate graspings.
I want to be soaked in the storm of you.
The frogs lock in amplexus,
stiff limbed, singing prayers
that tell of thirsty months
quenched in one moment.
I lay prostrate,
lapping at the edge of the pool
and silently mouthing
my own prayers,
lost in your holy taste.

Wall Street [this was written way before occupy]

the end is totally nigh!

hungry dollar orgies are

swallowing themselves

and choking on the stomach acid.

you must repent!

drink kerosene and burp up flaming apologies.

I've heard the death cultists plotting and whispering

about you in the middle

of their satanic golf game.

seriously: luigi galleani saw the future

and he says you're screwed.

keep a lookout for red-eyed horses

saint that drank whiskey in the morning to take the edge off. you told us about plans to leave and turn your life around. You say you are going up to Oklahoma to build a pipeline, or to Arizona to dry out, any place but here really. You say you are leaving and we all nod seriously and say we will miss you. even though none of us think it will happen, not even you, saint ferdinand, we act like it is possible because believing there is a way out is what separates the dead from the living, and we do not want you to die.

You may come close to death when the water rises or hunger beckons but I know you now, saint ferdinand, your bed of skulls can't fool me. You are a saint of the living. When we are on your street we are vibrant vessels filled up with your messages. You come pouring out of our mouths we can't help it. I will praise you no matter how wrinkled your face gets. I will be reverent as I avoid your potholes. you will always be a lit candle in the church of my chest, saint ferdinand.

Amphibians

right now I feel like
I am a thousand desert frogs
waiting underground
for the first rains of the season
to seep down and wake them.
I reach and feel you
slick and damp as algae
in between the smooth
river rock curves of your thighs.
Now the frogs are awake,
crawling to the surface
frantic with memories

she's that special kind of woman
you mostly find in country songs
her name was Kathleen O'Malley
but we just called her Rose
red hair resting on shoulders
looked just like petals, I suppose.
she warned him she was wild
wouldn't grow in flower beds
she said "love may sprout in your heart
but it blossoms in your head"
but Richard wasn't thinkin
the night that he proposed
she said "poor boy I been tellin you
no vase can hold my rose"
so dejected and disheveled
he ran out the barroom door
took to the bottle and the open road
things he'd never tried before
he hopped the Night Train Express outta town
didn't know what else to do
then Mad Dogs chased him down the tracks
so on the Thunderbird he flew

but crushed dreams seem to have wings too
he's grounded, now he knows
the only thing to ease his troubled mind
is Richards Wild Irish Rose

Ghost Pussy

1.

well I got a girlfriend
that I just can't see
but she comes over every night
and she wails at me
it's not just me and these steers
when I'm out on this prairie
my love is dead she's in my head
she's got that ghost pussy
and a cowgirl gets to longing
for the warmth of a womans touch
and she may give me chills
but there's still heat between us
I drink beer and fart and curse
and she has never fussed
even though she's filling up a grave

kitchen is a bottle of liquor with drowned scorpions inside of it. if you are stung and do not get drunk on this special liquor then you will probably die. it is not at all unusual for a man who is recovering from a sting to be unable to walk right or speak clearly. In the morning he will wake up with a headache but he will be happy to be alive.

Saint Ferdinand Street

Saint Ferdinand, patron saint of sleeping under a bridge. saint of trains crashing into each other on purpose. Saint of bleached crawfish shells in giant puddles after a storm: they could almost be alive again. Saint of purple morning glories engulfing a house that is made of tears. Saint of endless mosquitoes and the futile ceiling fans that blow them around the room.

saint of cryptic feline governments with screeching yowling congressional meetings over discarded sardine cans, and what do they decide each night? To stay furry and creeping and desperate, like their beloved saint ferdinand who they can't betray. this conclusion is the result of bipartisan cooperation.

Saint of patched tire tubes that always call out for more patches. Saint of rats in love. Saint of white clamshell sidewalks with blue and green broken bottles and how could so many beautiful things be made by accident? Saint of secret friends who whisper as they sit in the smashed car on cinder blocks. Saint of a thousand meals made from cabbages. Saint of cockroaches parading down the street declaring that they are actually not disgusting.

Saint ferdinand I declare you the saint of whoever stole my shoes, may their toes be forever free of fungus. You are the old

every step i take scatters dark lizards into hiding.
the jays hop through the bushes shedding dull feathers that glow blue in the sun,
and though the locals call them 'trash birds', they are radiant.
the eagles overhead have no idea that they are supposed to be symbols.
last night a mother cougar screamed like a dying woman
and this morning there were paw prints as big as my palm
in the soft dirt at the edge of the gravel road.
but amidst all this,
it is the sight of your perfect boobs
in a picture you sent to my cell phone
that makes me feel in awe of nature.

Hummingbirds

one thousand thrusts

a second, after lightspeed

foreplay. they link for

only half a minute

but it feels like sweet

slow years

to them.

The Cure

in the village they are afraid of scorpions. the scorpions are only the size of a toenail but it is always a big deal when they crawl into someones bathroom on a mission for moisture. every house is prepared for the inevitable sting. waiting in every

she still fills me with lust

and sometimes, I can hear her singing, from the other side, and this is what she says:

2.

for the first month of 1865 I was alive and gay

till bandits came from the badlands and took my girl away

I lived out on our ranch till I felt so much loneliness

I took my dears revolver and put a bullet in my breast

now I roam around lookin for gals workin the trails

when I hear steam engines whistle I look for ladies riding rails

I reward these womens bravery resourcefulness and pluck

if they're not scared of my ghost puss our ectoplasms fuck

3.

now the legend of ghost pussy

rolls down western highways

it's been passed down by wild women

so it still survives today

tough hussies on their harleys

and ladies driving eighteen wheels

exchange sly winks at truck stops

they know how ghost pussy feels

Honesty

In Bretts room we are all on experimental drugs someone ordered from China.

What I took feels tidal - the waves come in huge and sensuous, smashing against the beach boulders of my brain, and then the shore drains and the mussels close their shells and the crabs feel frantic and I don't know what to do with myself until the wave comes back to me.

In Bretts room we are all being too honest. One person will say something and then look at the rest of us with a quick scared smile. We are all being ugly in front of each other and we can't stop until we come down. There is some nervousness behind the drug-sparkle in our eyes and I want to tell these boys that its fine to be ugly and out of control, I've done it for years, but just then a wave comes in and when I open my mouth only the sound of the sea comes out.

My Bad

we are both in your bed looking away from each other. we take turns crying.

I am very good at making mistakes. You're pretty good at it too, but it was my turn to fuck up, and I did.

Have you ever flipped over a log and found plants that grew underneath? They are white instead of green, with yellow leaves.

When you look at me you are mad for a good reason and that light is too much for the seeds I sprouted in the darkness.

piecing together meals of mice.
struggle is not romantic, it is horrible, but for what its worth what i've learned from privilege is that there are many kinds of captivity.

[I am looking for the sea that will let my people go, that will part for me and flood only my enemies but I will tell you right now hurricanes are not the kind of help I am looking for. the ocean was our ally once, how do we get that back?]

I do not have to eat herbs to remind me of the bitterness of slavery: I live in louisiana. it is on the wind and in the water and that tiny taste is much worse than the things in my life that have brought me to the floor weeping snotting and thinking fondly of death.

we are so very soft

but there are wingbeats beneath the ribcage, there is no heart there is a bird.
a hawk that gets all of its water from the blood of its prey, a hawk waiting to fly out of egypt and never leave the desert again. we have always been wild beasts, so somewhere sharp talons wait beneath the down and flight feathers.

At Work

I am in the california wilderness, with snowy peaks in the distance,
walking through tunnels in the endless manzanita thickets and watering the little cannabis plants that reach towards the sun
unaware that they are illegal.

fearing like I am, but what are we surrounded with out here, if not by god and fear?

I am just a construction worker, so I do not know what woke us up from hibernation, or what strange forces will rip us to pieces when this metal gives way, that thin metal separating us from the unforgiving heavens.

Your badge says you are a physicist, so you must be imagining the intricate details of our imminent demise. As I said, I do not know them, nor do I wish to. I don't care how it happens, What I want is to die with the parts of my body that are the most sensitive and expressive protecting the parts of you that are most vulnerable, and if you want to, I'd like you to reciprocate. We do not need these grey jumpsuits. We need a little tenderness instead. Put your hands and mouth on my cock while it is soft with fear, bridge the space between us so we can forget about the space that is all around us. I have been a rough man but for our last moments lets try to be gentle and kind, forget science and construction and metal and just remember skin.

Passover

we have always been wild beasts. the margins were safe once but I grew up at the edge of the city and even there, especially there, we were all collared and holding each others leashes. on the count of three I want us all to let go but we are too weak for that now, too sick on the toxic bait of comfort.

it is the thought of an easy meal that kills the coyotes that dared to live on land meant for ranching: a nice big hunk of sheep with sweet rat poison filling, the promise of a break from

I want to hold your hand but instead I ask to hold your toe. I choose the smallest one because I'm not sure I deserve the others. We sit there for an hour, taking turns crying, and I try to squeeze your pinky toe in some way that says I am so sorry.

(That whole not killing mosquitoes thing only lasted one night)

It is dusk and only the mosquitoes are as thirsty as I am. I have plenty of beers and so do they when they take my blood. They fly away from me slowly, plump and red, their little brains cloudy, tiny hiccups escaping their mouths. Lately I can't kill them, not because I am unwilling to accept the karmic debt, but because I know that the bugs and I are all just trying to eat.

there was a time when I wasn't so understanding. I thought what was in my veins was my own damn business.

that summer I lived on the edge of a pond in vermont, and for two weeks the mosquitoes and I were at war.

the winter before, all the bats died from white nose fungus. it grew on thier faces while they slept, and they woke up early, cold and confused. they flew around their caves until they froze. no one knows why.

without them the air was black with bugs. I slept in an attic and every time the soft chewing of the carpenter ants would lull me towards sleep, the mosquitoes would taste me and I would wake up confused. I would swat them and rub their dead bodies into my skin as a warning to others: "if you think I will quench your thirst, this is what will happen to you! I curse all your children to die in a bats belly! You come to drink form me but I will turn the tables and bathe in your blood!"

I don't believe in bug spray.

Eventually I started eating them. I thought that if I put them in my body I might sweat out signals to them: "stay away! this is a predator! a devourer of your kind!" but they kept coming. I thought I might go crazy, but then the dragonflies all crawled out of the pond.

They covered the dock in their old skins and flexed new killer wings in the sun. It was a good summer for dragonflies. I stopped eating mosquitoes when the dragonflies sat in the empty seats at the dead bats dinner table and feasted. I could hear them buzzing just before dusk, asking the wind for a second helping.

I've calmed down a lot since then. I'm not so eager to swat mosquitoes, after all, what am I using all that blood for? It seems kind of like owning a supermarket and pouring bleach in the dumpsters to keep away the hungry. Why bother? I'm not using it and there's plenty more where that came from. Just be discrete, don't make a mess, and eat your fill.

What's Left

a block down from where I sleep there is a new japanese car, resting on cinder blocks beneath the overpass. At first it was nearly intact, though obviously stolen. As the nights passed I watched a decay gnaw at it, much quicker than rust, and with a deeper hunger.

The windows had a need for rocks. They called out for them, in a song that only children could hear, and even then only at night. The doors ran off and paid someones rent. The engine went to the scrapyard where it propelled people.

People who needed money because they needed food because that is one part of what keeps us alive and moving.

Months ago that car moved across the pacific to america where someone bought it to move them to and from work but it is resting now. its new upholstered seats are comfortable, and I rest on them, gulping drinks that are another piece of what keeps me alive and willing to move for another day.

I look at the stripped car frame and think of this teenage time in the woods, years ago, when I found a coyote skeleton at the bottom of some boulders, its ribcage a series of white towers rising from the pool of brown fur that decay poured onto the leaf litter. Its flesh was stripped away by those who needed it and I sat, stoned and reverent, loving what the hungry leave behind.

Last Moments

My name is mikhail stavonovich. Your name tag says Brett wainwright. We are just meeting now, as the red lights flash in the hallway and alarms ring.

we both know the spaceship is broken.
strange gasses vent from holes we weren't suppose to have.
radiation and space debris, shit like that, it's going to kill us.
I was put on the ship because I am strong. I can lift heavy things and build the ecosystem bubbles our mission was going to need when we colonized the stars.
you scientists are better at dreaming than building.

I am a christian, orthodox, though you might think its silly for me to think that jesus can reach out here, lightyears from his middle eastern manger. I know you scientists are not god